Dallas Bower interview
Recorded 18.6.87, interviewer Alan Lawson/Roy Fowler

Tape 1, Side 1

- When and where were you born?
- What kind of schooling did you have?
- Did you get any special schooling or training for later life?
  [interest in radio sparked]
- Did you take any exams at school?
  I went straight from school into radio, having set up my own amateur station in Upper Richmond Road, Putney, and when the time came for work I simply wrote to the Marconi Scientific Instrument Company and said, could I be of any value to them? And surprise, surprise, I was immediately given a job.
- What was the job? And what did they pay you?
- Then from Marconis, where did you go then?
  [writing about radio for journals, then editing]
- Then from BTH you went to BIP; was that with the BTH sound system?
  [RCA equipment at BIP Elstree; first Ring at Covent Garden; offered position as sound recordist at Elstree; childhood interest in cinema – as a small boy I saw Intolerance and Birth of a Nation]
- So in fact you could say you had encouragement from the family – they didn't oppose this rather foreign medium?
  [no opposition from my mother, drama is in the family – Sarah Siddons was my great-great-great grandmother; my father was interested in commerce, he was a businessman]
- Where we you living when you were working at BIP, and how did you get too and from work?
  [living at Mill Hill, driven to Elstree]
- What wages were you getting at BIP then?
- You were a floor recordist?
  [in a booth, on the floor]
- There's always been a nagging doubt as to which was the first British talkie; was it Blackmail? Or was it Under the Greenwood Tree?
  [I suppose you must say it was Blackmail, started as a silent, decided to re-shoot much of it for sound; recdd Under the Greenwood Tree, worked with Claude Friese-Greene]
- Tell us a bit about Friese
  [extraordinary man, totally unflappable, quiet, enormous confidence… in himself, extremely agreeable in every way, own crew loved him; found working in a booth really difficult, as we all did]
- What were working conditions like, from the point of view of sound recordists in those early days?
  [absolute hell, details of working with equipment]
- Booms hadn't come in?
  [considerably later]
- Were there any concealed mics on the set?

[no, only concealed mic I used was on a comedy with Monty Banks, working with 3 cameras, mic under Estelle Thompson's gown, in due course Miss Thompson became Miss Oberon

- You did talk about some work you did on microphones while you were at BIP, you found a way of improving them?
  [no Alan I think you're confusing it, it wasn't microphones, it was to do with recording music really well; halfpenny under a galvanometer, greatly increased the bass quality of the technical recording]
- You've talked about Reinders (?); let's talk about other personalities up at BIP when you were there at the time – there was Walter Mycroft, what was his job?
  [previously became film critic of Evening Standard, strange man, immense enthusiasm for German cinema, eminence grise; Mycroft was effectively artistic director of the place, brought in remarkable range of people, many from Germany, practically a straight import from Ufa]
- Did he produce any original work at all?
  [no, but he more or less set the units in motion; Under the Greenwood Tree, scenario by Frank Launder and Monkton Hoff (?), from play.
- Let's move on then, and I suppose this is when, was it Maxwell appeared and he put in Stapleton
  [Maxwell was Chairman of the company, put in Stapleton to make plant run more economically, Stapleton was a total disaster, story about clapper boy leaving the shots]
- You left BIP to go and join Stolls – why was that? Was the equipment more attractive?
  [yes, the working conditions at BIP were quite intolerable; Vitatone equipment at Stolls, atmosphere at Cricklewood was very different, BIP most appalling exploitation, but we were doing something of a pioneer nature]
- [Alan] I was at Stolls when they opened up, the same as you, and I've got a very vivid memory of you, when Dick was, I think it was on Such is the Law, he was having microphone shadow problems, and you just came in and sky-ed the mic, and that was the first time I'd ever seen a sound recordist, not give way but be co-operative with a cameraman. Why was it that you could do that when in the past nobody had ever done it?
  [some of my colleagues were interested only in recdg good sound, but I was interested in the cinema as well]
- I've got an old feeling in my memory that a lot of the early sound operators had come from being wireless operators, either on maritime, navy or other areas. Is that a fair thing?
  [no, there may have been one or two, but certainly not the early BIP people]
- A useful thing to kill. When do you think the co-operation between the sound department and camera department really came about? Was it the better equipment, was it a new breed of technician coming in that made this possible?
  [combination of both; sound equipment was improving; major step was the blimp, and the first blimp was designed at BIP by Theodore Sparkel, who

became Lubitsch's cameraman, own blimp, made a wealth of difference, and of course the microphone boom]

- In your years as a sound recordist, which director do you remember perhaps making the best use of sound, in an imaginative way?
  [I suppose you could say that Hitch did by using sound expressionistically; wild track of "knife" we recdd that wildtrack]
- What made you decide to give up sound recording? You went over to editing after sound recording, didn't you?
  [Thorold Dickinson had an immense influence on me; Film Society; Sidney Cole; assts to Thorold for Film Society, and I became interested in editing; then there came an opportunity to edit on scoring for Q Ships; I found I could do this and wanted to do this, importance of his assistants]
- You were doing mainly sound editing, or did you go on to picture editing as well?
  [oh yes, first film editing was for Pathé, comedy Midnight Sister]
- Then after that you went on to do direction, didn't you?
  [Reginald Smith set up Riverside Studios, wanted to make films of a kind that he had not previously been making at Cricklewood, wanted something that was just a shade better than the average of those days; asked me if I had something I'd like to direct – and I made The Path of Glory there in 1933]
- How long did you stay with Smith, or did you do others pictures elsewhere?
  [made one feature and short Turn of the Ebb; The Path of Glory had a interesting career, Valerie Hobson's first film, also Maurice Evans]
- We've really arrived at the time when you became associated with Paul Czinner; tell us about that.
  [met him first at BIP, had made silent Street of Lost Souls here, with PolaNegri, music being put to this; years later, asked to be his special assistant, first film was Escape Me Never, and then subsequently As You Like It]
- Tell us more about him, what was he like to work with?
  [primary point about Paul was, he came from a family of doctors, PhD was in psychiatry, had quite exceptional capacity for handling actors, actresses, found him simpatico, I learnt a very great deal from him, at the same time I think both of them (with Bergner) found working here rather difficult, very unpunctual, after B's appendicitis I more or less had to finish it]
- Who else were the leading technicians on those films? You say Lee Games and Hal Orson (?), who else?
  [Escape Me Never was ph'd by (?), took a rather poor view of Paul, who had David Lean more or less at his elbow –
  I was responsible for bringing William Walton in to do the music, there was a great deal of discussion of who was going to do that small ballet for Escape Me Never, and I said there's no doubt in my mind you've got two composers here, either of whom could do it, preferably Walton, Lambert or Walton, and I think Walton is your chap, and Walton indeed it became, so it was a fairly high-powered team
  David was the editor, same set-up except that AYLI had two cameramen Hall Rosson and then Lee Garmes; additional additive was Lazard

Meerson, who had previously done all of Clair's films, assistant Alexander Trauner, two superb art directors
got to know David Lean because we both worked on Escape Me Never, passion for fast motorcars

- Of those pre-war years, which actor or director do you think made a lasting impression on you?
  [Czinner certainly, and as a technician Thorold, extremely good, and I was extremely fond of him]

- Now we've arrived at I suppose what I would say is perhaps the turning point of your professional career, when you suddenly decided to go into television – what made you decide to do that?

  I think before we continue we'll have some more coffee, because I'm getting a bit hoarse.

Tape 1, Side 2

- We now arrive I think at perhaps the turning point of your professional career. Television has arrived, and you decided to go into it. What made you decide to try this new form of entertainment?

  Twofold thing. In the early days of radio, the Radio Society of Great Britain, of which I think I was probably one of the youngest members, used to meet in Savoy Hill, at the Institute of Electrical Engineers and on one occasion a lecture was given by one Campbell-Swinton. Now Campbell-Swinton, in his head, invented the cathode ray oscillograph, which as you know is absolutely indigenous, in fact it's the quintessence of television today, and at this lecture, which none of us who were there have ever forgotten, there was this wonderful idea in this man's head, but in fact how was it to be done? Because in those days it was quite impossible to make vacuum tubes of that high degree of vacuum necessary, for the thing to work practically.

  And that sparked off an interest in me in television as such, and then if we might so to speak, as Lothar Mendes used to say, quick dissolve now, quick dissolve, six feet, Gerald Cock, who became the first director of television when the service was put into the hands of the BBC by the government at that time, came to Cricklewood to do some recording for some OBs that he was going to make. In those days you see the Corporation had very few recording facilities of any consequence, and any recording that was necessary of the kind that he wanted – what he wanted these recordings for is of no great moment, they were links, I think, that could be done in this way, and he decided to do it in this way, because he was director of outside broadcasts, indeed was responsible for the first broadcast of the monarch at that time, George V who liked him very much personally, and he came to Cricklewood, and I liked him very much and apparently he liked me, and I said if ever…, and quite how this happened I can't accurately recollect, he started talking about television, and I said

how interested I was in television, and related this story about Campbell-Swinton, and it was quite obvious that I think Cock was perhaps a bit reluctant ever to take it on, you know, but felt it was something he would like to do because he had tremendous faith in it you see, and when the service was set up he more or less called his own terms in so far as Reith was concerned, because Reith wanted to have nothing whatsoever to do with it, thought the Corporation had been landed with something that it really had no business on the part of the select committee set up by the government to land it with, and he didn't believe in it furthermore, thought it wasn't properly developed and to a certain extent he was right, in as much as everyone thought the Baird system was going to work and of course it was clearly not going to work, it was going to be an electronic system and not a mechanical system.

Anyhow I said to Gerald Cock if ever he, if he thought he was going to recruit staff, I'd like him to bear me in mind. And he was very adamant about taking people professionally into the service from the film industry and from the theatre. Hence Stephen Thomas, George More O'Farrell and myself, and indeed Peter Bax from Drury Lane, people like Peter Bax, Harry Pringle, marvellous stage manager, at one time running the Coliseum as a music hall, the Holborn Empire and the Palladium if you please. People of that calibre. And indeed when the service was finally set up I was invited to join the service and nothing could have given me greater pleasure than to say this is something that is a most wonderful opportunity and there is really nothing I would like to do more.

• Did you get any pre-transmission training sessions at all?

No, what happened was, I mean, I think there were six of us, if you exclude the two announcers, two splendid girls Jasmine Bligh and Elizabeth Cowell, Leslie Mitchell was already an announcer of course, yes there were nine of us in all, we came into the Corporation, and in those days it was rather like being made a senior member of Trinity House (?), it was all very grand, and we were attached to various departments in Broadcasting House, so that we could more or less learn procedures… what happened was we were attached to various departments, and I remember the very first task that I ever performed for the Corporation was in a show of Max Kester's at St George's Hall which of course was the old Maskelyne[…] theatre next to the Queen's Hall, a show of Max's called Ice Cream Too Much, which was a parody on One Night of Love by Spike Hughes, and Max was a splendid chap, he found me, there I was sitting around and he said Would you like to take a line old fellow? And said I'd do anything he wanted me to do, and so he said, well here's a line, and so the first thing I ever did professionally for the BBC was to impersonate Ernest Newman, leaving a performance at Covent Garden, and the memorable line was I thought the horns were splendid. And then of course we finally found our way to Alexandra Palace where we plunged into the deep end.

• Tell us the difference between working in the television studio in those days, and the film studio. How different was it?

Well it was very different, to this extent Alan, that the studios had in fact been planned as a theatre rather than as a film studio, I'm talking now about A and B at Alexandra Palace, they were both of coursedamped (?) and both A and B had tabs, they both had a cyclorama, in fact the consideration that had been given to the actual setting up of the studios – mind you there was no precedent as to how it was all going to operate, but as I was quite clear, very clear I think to myself and Stephen that the primary requirement was that we should operate in the manner of a film studio rather than the manner of a theatre, the very nature of what in fact we were putting on the screen: it was monochromatic, and it had more or less to be the final result of what we were doing at the receiving end had to look more or less as far as it was possible as it could look to a film, rather than a long shot of a theatre performance. And so what we very soon found ourselves doing was to break up our material in such a way that we had little alcoves so to speak in which small sets were erected around these two very small studios rather than shooting continuously one-way, no reverses bear in mind, one way into a set in front of a cyclorama.

• Tell us about some of the early productions that you did up there.

Well I think the major point of criticism about those early days, and it's something that again I think is most unfortunate, there was a fair degree of jealousy was set up, because there's no question we were over ambitious, I don't think there's any question of that at all, but I mean there's nothing wrong in that in as much as if we hadn't been over-ambitious as we were, when the service re-opened after the war, we wouldn't have got anything as far as we had got, and although I think we were over-ambitious to the extent that some of our productions *were* over-ambitious, certainly mine were, and had defects inevitably, at the same time I never regret having done, let's say, The Tempest, you see, which was an immensely difficult thing to do.

• What was the budget for that?

Oh that the budget was miniscule, in terms of the present day, I think it cost under £500, but one of the interesting things about it was, having decided to do it, I decided that here was this wonderful Sibelius score and could we not use it? It had never been used. Gordon Craig commissioned it from Sibelius for a production that never came off, and Sibelius put the score into a suite for a concert performance, and one of the problems there of course was the fact that the storm music for the opening of the play as you know an enormous storm takes place, was scored for a Ring-sized orchestra and it had to be re-scored. Now the early television service had the most wonderful orchestra and a musical director who if he'd lived would certainly have become one of the leading international conductors of this century, HyamGreenbaum. And he decided to re-score the work, and

Cecil Gray who was a close friend of his, and also a close friend of Sibelius, was going to Finland to see Sibelius, took this re-scored Storm to Finland for Sibelius' approval and the great man said, I can't think why on earth I didn't score it this way originally, and of course that's what we used.

And I had a very distinguished cast, largely by virtue of the fact that we'd already in those days done an outside broadcast from the Phoenix Theatre, which was a beautiful production by Michel St Denis of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, and it was just at a time when the London Theatre Studio, which was run by St Denis, was running into difficulties, and Peggy Ashcroft wrote a note to me, and she said she understood I was going to do The Tempest, could I use in any way use any of St Denis's people, and I thought my goodness me what an opportunity this is, and so I invited Peggy who was then I think twenty-five or twenty-six, she looked eighteen of course, whether she'd like to play Miranda, as indeed she did, and again you see the kind of people around, available, was quite superb, my Prospero was a man called John Abbott, who in fact disappeared during the war I believe in rather unhappy circumstances, I don't know the details, but my Ariel was Stephen Haggard, my Ferdinand was Richard Adley, and my Caliban was George Devine. Really what more could one want?

Then again George More O'Farrell did Hasan which was an immensely ambitious thing to do, but it came off superbly, and he also did a wonderful production of Journey's End, superb production of Journey's End in fact.

- You talked about doing an OB from the Phoenix; what was it like working on early OBs?

Oh, extremely difficult, extremely difficult. We had the OB vans of course, and the director of OBs for the Television Service was Philip Doughty (?), and when it was decided that they wanted to do this production of St Denis', and Philip said I'm afraid I'm not capable of handling this myself, I'd like to have old Dallas handle it, and so I went to Michel and said I'm afraid I'm going to mess about with your production, he couldn't have been more co-operative in every way, and he said of course, naturally in order to shoot it I don't know how you're going to do it, and so I said well I'm going to close everything up rather and he came and sat next to me at my side, and that was the first OB from a London theatre that we'd ever done. And leading out of that we went to Denham and Pinewood and did six OBs from each, with the units working at those studios at that time. That was very interesting.

- What was it really like to be the director – to be the producer of a television production?

Well, I think it would be fair to say that the strain was quite frightful. One was never in a position of being able to sit back at the premiere of one's work, as one should be able to sit back, if one's directing a play in the theatre you should be in front at the first night, nowhere near, any director

should not be backstage, be in front, in the same way any film director wants to be at his premiere, sitting in the audience, not anywhere near the projection room let's say. And the whole point about television, live television, particularly drama was that, and to a very large extent it still holds good you know, there's never really enough rehearsal time, the result was that one gave a performance to all extent and purposes oneself, from the control bridge, largely due to the fact that one might have come up you see with a cast – for instance, I did a production of Rope, Patrick Campellton's (?) Rope, I think one of the best thrillers of the century, now for the final presentation I only had the crew, the full crew, two sound booms and four camera operators for a day, and therefore what one found liable to happen was that if you didn't in fact in your allocated rehearsal time get through all you wanted to get through, you were really shooting off the cuff, and giving directions to your operators as to what they were going to do next in the way of you were coming on to let's say Camera 3, and you were telling Camera 2 being on the air, you were briefing Camera 3, now line up on the door and as the actor makes his entrance on that door, he is going to walk quite quickly to his marks, so you'll have to do a fairly quick pan to the left, that sort of instruction was going on while transmission was taking place – you can see the sort of thumb muscle sort of operation (?) it amounted to, and that was one of the great problems, was really getting a smooth production and you know poor set-ups and wobbling set-ups and cutting peoples' heads, you know, simple as that, the sort of thing you would never allow in the cinema for a minute, you know if you shot yourself like that you'd just be on the cutting room floor straightaway.

- Before we leave those early AP days, but jumping ahead as it were fifty years, recently there was a television production called Fools on the Hill. Do you think it gave an accurate impression of what it was like to work up at AP in those days, and the various roles that people played?

  No. No, it was a total parody of what in fact took place. Apart from personalities, quite apart from personalities at all, I can never recollect, and I was there from the very beginning, I produced and directed the opening programme, and I think I was there on the last night when the service closed, I was in fact because a production of mine was taking place, I can remember the Vintentrolly running into the set, which is what happened in this wretched parody called Fools on the Hill, and the reason it was called Fools on the Hill is Reith refers to us all as Fools on the Hill in his own personal diary which was published not so long ago. I can never remember there being a camera accident of that kind. Furthermore, Fools on the Hill makes out that the engineering staff and the programme staff were to a certain extent at loggerheads, it was never, in fact precisely the reverse, was what happened. Cock was absolutely insistent upon there being complete and utter co-operation between camera and sound staff, and engineering staff in general, and the programme staff, and this was done quite admirably because in D H Munrow (?) we had an absolutely first class production manager, a man who was on his toes to such an extent

that there was never any question of us not being totally co-operative, and therefore this wretched programme, Fools on the Hill, was nothing like what occurred at AP in those days, not remotely.

- I'm glad we've cleared that up because we I had the same kind of feeling that you had.

- War
  [after Munich, Corporation's poor arrangements for war, put myself in for all three services, commissioned into the Royal Corps of Signals]

  [posted to a training brigade at Whitby, Films Division of the Ministry of Information, no experience of films, Kenneth Clark appointed, and he asked for me, hauled out of the army, loaned, still technically a member of the BBC, to Ministry of Information, to sit at Clark's elbow]

  [I was the equivalent of an executive producer, vetting all scripts, also we very soon found ourselves in position of producers, films about careless talk, done very quickly, Balcon at Ealing, John Paddy Carstairs and I wrote the scripts, had worked with Paddy at AP, extremely quick, then qn of how they were going to be shown, consult with KRS, managed to get them into just over 4,000 cinemas]

  [when KC left the division, the films division taken over by Jack Beddington, became something quite different, he wanted to make the 5-minuters, worked with the directors I knew, Boultings, Thorold, but I didn't see eye to eye with Beddington, and I think that applies to many people, including Noel Coward, In Which We Serve, Henry V, 49th Parallel, Beddington had had a very narrow experience of filmmaking, had been at Shell, I decided I'd had enough of it, so I went back to the Corporation, kept myself out of the Army thank God, experience of Army Signals]

- You went back to the Beeb, the war was still on, what were you doing for the Beeb in those days?

  Out of the drama department, Val Gielgud's department, had developed a documentary… well, the features department of the drama division, let's call it that, was run by Laurence Gilliam, and I was simply posted to this division of the BBC, and I was there to do whatever was wanted of me, and unofficially I became Val's, who I knew personally and who liked me very much, we were close personal friends, and I became his personal assistant and there was anything that was wanted of me, either in drama productions or in features productions, I was available to do.

  [Louis MacNeice, Alexander Nevsky, for sound, a paraphrase, did that at Bedford, where the music division was stationed, Prokofiev score needed an orchestra the size of the No 1 orchestra, prodn took place the night

after Pearl Harbour, given more or less a free hand with casting, Robert Hardy, Peggy Ashcroft, Boult of course conducted the orchestra]

[other big prodn was Columbus, gesture to celebrate 450th anniversary of the discovery of America, two governors said we must do this, commissioned Walton to write an original score, Larry played Columbus, very ambitious]

• When did you go back into films? Was it during the war?

[Henry V came about in this way, after Munich I'd done a TV script, and I had it in mind that Ralph might play Henry, and so I'd got a script, Filippo del Giudice, and I suggested to him that it would be a splendid idea if we did this; Del took this up, and bought my script, and I resigned from the Corporation]

• Tell us about setting up Henry V

[very difficult to do, Agincourt, horses and men, Eire, importance of John Betjeman in setting this up]

• After Henry V, what did you go on to next?

I did The Second Mrs Tanqueray – and I did that as if it were a television production, four cameras, and poor old Gerald Gibbs had to edit it for me, and that nearly drove him dotty. The only thing that really went wrong was a slight shadow on Virginia McKenna's nose in a cross-cut, and I didn't think that was going to sink the whole operation. It was interesting to this extent, in that it was made very cheaply, and I rehearsed it for a week in the Adelphi Theatre, which Bill [?] had very kindly let me have the lease of it, and then into the old Stoll rehearsal room on the roof of the Stoll Theatre in Kingsway was all four camera crews and two boom operators, a week there, and went into Riverside, and shot the whole thing in eight days. And I think it cost well under £25,000, and of course Pamela Brown gave a superb performance as Mrs Tanqueray which was what she wanted to do, and that was one of the reasons we set it up.

• You also made a version of Alice in Wonderland. What about that?

It's a long story… cut for a minute.

[discn of Alice, through to end of tape 1, side 2]

<u>Tape 2, Side 1</u>

[more on Alice, sound not so good on this tape]